DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 152 651 SO 010 788

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TITLE Educators and the Class Analysis: Some Questions from the Perspective of Critical Theory.
PUB DATE Mar 78
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Toronto, Ontario, March 27-31, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Analytical Criticism; Culture Conflict; Ecological Factors; *Educational History; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Research; Educational Theories; Educational Trends; Evaluation; Futures (of Society); Literature Reviews; *Political Issues; Problem Solving; Social Change; *Social Class; Social Differences; Social Problems; Social Status; Socioeconomic Influences; *Technology; Theories; Values
IDENTIFIERS Marxism

ABSTRACT

Revisionist educational historians tend to analyze American education in light of Marxist theories of social class without giving due consideration to the fact that technology and bureaucracy are the dominant political and cultural forces affecting education in the 20th century. A review of educational debate during the 1960s and 1970s indicates that both the radical revisionist educational historians and advocates of the alternative school movement have been preoccupied with themes that were important in the 19th and early 20th centuries but are less relevant today. These themes, including Marx's concept of class conflict and Rousseau's idea about the goodness of human nature, have encouraged educational reforms that are inappropriate to modern social needs because they do not take technology into consideration. Limitations of educational revisionists' analyses of the relationship of school to society are due to many factors, including: (1) the concept of class conflict is irrelevant to a commodity culture; (2) no adequate criteria have been established to determine who belongs to which class; and (3) phenomenological evidence has not been produced to support Marxist claims about class consciousness. The conclusion is that recent research on the relationship of social class to education by American educational revisionists is based more upon traditional Marxist rhetoric than upon evidence. (Author/DB)

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Educators and the Class Analysis: Some Questions from the Perspective of Critical Theory

by

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1978

Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Toronto, Ontario, March 27-31, 1978)

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An important question today is whether educational critics and reformers see the emergent nature of the technocratic ideology, and its existential and ecological implications. In terms of the legacy of social and educational criticism of the two most prominent groups--the radical revisionist educational historians and the neo-romantics of the alternative school movement--the answer is no. While the influence of both groups has waned, they nevertheless commanded wide audiences and dominated the direction of educational debate over the last ten years. Yet their analyses and recommendations for educational reform have not stimulated a serious discussion of the school as a carrier of technological consciousness. This was largely due to the fact that both groups had their own prefigured agendas for change. Instead of recommending social changes based on an analysis of the emergent characteristics of technological consciousness, they used lenses borrowed from 18th and 19th century ideologies to focalize the present issues and this in turn predetermined what they saw in terms of future possibilities. For the radical revisionist educational historians the lens was that of class conflict, while the neo-romantics resurrected Rousseau's idea of the innate goodness of human nature, and its corollary that social institutions are the source of original sin. Unfortunately, the educational debates stimulated by these two groups, while vigorous and humanely intentioned, served to defocalize the social and ecological consequences of a technocratic society, with the consequence that leading educational reformers appear to be urging changes for the future based on the reality they see through the rear view mirror of history. Because the neo-romantic view of social and human possibilities generate somewhat less interest today we shall focus our attention on the limitations of using the class analysis as a conceptual model for understanding the dominant problems we

face--the emergent commodity-technologically driven culture and the ecological crisis. Many of the questions we shall raise about the views of the educational revisionists are similar to the questions that Critical Theory poises for traditional Marxists.

The educational revisionist's analysis of the relation of schools to society is perhaps the most important example of cultural lag, as it is indebted to the traditional Marxist idea of class conflict. Although the revisionists subscribed to a variety of interpretations of class conflict--e.g., the status-anxious theories of Richard Hofstadter et. al, the elite domination theories of Michael Katz et. al, and the correspondence theories of Bowles and Gintis--they all hold the view that schools reproduce the conditions of social inequality existing in the larger society. For Bowles and Gintis, the Marxist economists whose work has become identified as the most theoretically sophisticated of this group, the school is seen as a tool of capitalism that stamps most students with the servile character traits and values of the working class, while providing a smaller more privileged group of students with the mental traits necessary for social and economic leadership. As stated by Bowles and Gintis, "Education plays a major role in hiding or justifying the exploitive nature of the U.S. economy."[1] To put it another way, "the economy produces people," and the schools simply reinforce the psychological and social implications of this dictum. As the revisionists in general, and Bowles and Gintis in particular, have already aroused considerable critical attention we shall be concerned with those aspects of the class analysis that defocalize the complex characteristics of technology and the ecological crisis.

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[1]Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, School in Capitalist America, New York, Basic Books, Inc., 1976, pp. 13-14.

The chief problem, according to Bowles and Gintis, is not the educational system, but the economic system which it reflects. Or as they put it: "The educational system, basically, neither adds to nor subtracts from the degree of inequality and repression originating in the economic sphere. Rather it reproduces and legitimates a preexisting pattern in the process of training and stratifying the work force."[2] In their analysis of the underlying problems besetting society it is important to note that they identify capitalism as the primary culprit. "Capitalism," they write, "has produced only the urban nightmare, the opprobrious dormitory suburb, the fragmented megalopolis, and the depressed rural ghetto."[3] The list of psychological damage caused by capitalism is equally long: "Capitalism and the 'Anxious Society' are one. Drugs, suicide, mental instability, personal insecurity, predatory sexuality, depression, loneliness, bigotry, and hatred mark the perennial fears of Americans."[4] While this list raises the question of why the United States has not had to erect barriers to keep its hapless and exploited masses from escaping to the "freedom" of East European socialist societies, a more important question relates to how their analysis of capitalism defocalizes the ideological nature of technology. For them there is nothing inherent in the nature of purposive rational thought, the conceptual traits fostered by technology, or positivism that should concern us. Rather it is capitalism that causes them to be used to less than their full potential. "Why should science and technology destroy

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Op. Cit., p. 265.

[4] Op. Cit., p. 276.

the natural environment?" they ask. Their answer is that modern technology is not a source of danger, but instead "should draw us into a more perfect union with nature."[5] In attempting to refute Jacques Ellul's argument that technique, in obeying the laws of its own internal logic, becomes an autonomous force that threatens both to turn the human being into an object and to destroy those aspects of cultural tradition not assimilable into the new technological culture, Bowles and Gintis claimed that technology "can only increase the set of alternatives open to society toward the satisfaction of its needs."[6] Any harmful effects, they assure their readers, result from capitalism and are not the "inevitable product of scientific rationality or technological necessity."

The alternative to capitalism, what they call democratic socialism, is pictured as an emergent form of social and economic democracy that will assure each individual the right (and "obligation" they add) to control their work experiences. In effect, it would extend participatory democracy into all areas of social life, including the economic. It would lead eventually, though not necessarily through democratic means,[7] to a classless society, and to an alternative to the wage-labor system (whether this would involve a return to a barter economy is not specified). Their vision of life after the revolution, which is to use the class struggle as its organizing principle, is the standard old-line Marxist eschatology. While the social revolution promises to

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[5] Ibid., pp. 275-276

[6] Ibid., p. 16.

[7] The statement by Bowles and Gintis that "a socialist movement must be based on the recognition of class struggle as its organizing principle" introduces a degree of ambiguity about how far they would rely upon the democratic process, if that process failed to produce the socialist society they envisage. Furthermore, the threat of a class struggle, as a strategy, serves to undermine the efficacy of the democratic process. See p. 283.

change dramatically the power relations of social and economic life, and presumably human nature itself, it will leave intact the underlying cultural assumptions of the old order. The new social order will, they promise, have an increased capacity for economic growth ("Democratic social relationships in production lead to highly motivated and productive workers"), a greater capacity for social planning ("Comprehensive and rational economic planning leads to heightened efficiency . . ."), and increased efficiency ("The increased efficiency of socialist economic life . . . ."). [8] Given their own reliance on a statistical model to produce legitimate knowledge one can presume that the epistemology of the new society will be positivistic rather than hermeneutic, which ironically would be more in harmony with the idea of participatory democracy.

By using a traditional Marxist analysis of capitalism and class conflict as a basis for understanding public education in America, Bowles and Gintis, along with other revisionist educators, have focused attention on the themes that were of paramount concern in the 19th and early part of this century, but seem increasingly outmoded by the emergence of a technological culture. Habermas and others have suggested that the concept of class conflict does not make much sense in a commodity culture. It should also be pointed out that the explanatory power of social class is diminished by the lack of an adequate criterion for determining who belongs in which class. Most people, including managers and technocrats, are part of the "wage-labor system," and the pension funds of labor unions represent a significant investment in the means of production. Even if class membership were sufficiently discernable to provide a better

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[8] Op. Cit., p. 268

clue about who the protagonists are in the unfolding drama of dialectical materialism, one would still have to ask how the concept of class can serve as a guide for transforming, much less understanding, the problematic aspects of society. The idea of class conflict, according to Marxist-Leninists, involves progressive stages of social development, with one of the stages being the dictatorship of the proletariat. While the revisionist educators are clearly apostles of participatory democracy and would presumably reject this part of Marxist dogma, one can only wonder how their theory of class conflict can lead to any other form of resolution in the real world than the establishment of a new elite, equipped with the technological and bureaucratic tools necessary for consolidating the revolution and guiding it to ever higher stages of development.

The question might also be raised about the revisionist's failure to produce phenomenological evidence to support their claims about the existence of class consciousness. Assertions about class consciousness in America, without supporting evidence of the values and expectations of working class people, makes the concept of class appear little more than a sterile abstraction and essentially useless category. In a symposium on class sponsored by the Critical Theory orientated Marxist journal, Telos, one participant suggested that "now, over fifty years after Lukacs, I think we have to reverse directions and reverse concepts. Which is to say, the question is not the class consciousness of the proletariat, but its class unconsciousness." Other participants referred to the concept of class in America as reflecting the Marxists return to "old-time religion" and criticized the intransigence of traditional Marxists' for maintaining their "deep anticultural, antipsychological" way of thinking. It was also suggested that while the concept of class was adequate for the 19th century, "by the time we get to the 1970s, any discussion of class in traditional terms is pure idealism: that

category is no longer theoretically relevant."[9] It could be added, however, and this may explain the revisionist educational critics use of the concept of class as central to their analysis of American education, that the concept of class must be retained because it provides the revolutionary agent. Without the concept of class consciousness the revisionists theory of social revolution would not be able to hide the fact that intellectual elites are the leaders of revolutionary change. For the eschatologically minded revolutionary making this explicit would be poor political strategy and an inept way to supply the spiritual sustenance and mystification necessary for a secular religious movement.

Alvin Gouldner, in his perceptive analysis of the deep structure of Marxism, raises additional concerns about the Marxist's use of class analysis by pointing out that Marxism embodies a new class relationship that subordinates the proletariat to the intellectual who is to explain how theory is to guide practice. As Gouldner noted: The Marxist "doctrine of the unity of theory and practice has this silence: how can one submit oneself to the tutelage of theory without at the same time, submitting oneself to the tutelage of theorists and intellectuals?" He goes on to observe that Marxism tacitly functions "to conceal the actual social structure of the socialist movement: it is a tacit doctrine about the social stratification within the socialist movement, and serves to obfuscate its structure of domination, and the origins and character of its dominant strats of intellectuals."[10] If the generic ideology of the revision-

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[9]Stanley Aronowitz, Russell Jacoby, Paul Piccone and Trent Schroyer, "Notes and Commentary: Symposium on Class, Telos, Summer, 1976, pp. 145-153. Also see John Alt, "Beyond Class: The Decline of Industrial Labor and Leisure," Telos, Summer, 1976, pp. 55-80.

[10]Alvin Gouldner, "Marxism and Social Theory." Theory and Society, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1974), p. 24.

ists, in borrowing from Marxist analysis of class, tacitly establishes the social relationship that is to exist between the masses and intellectuals we must ask why they have not acknowledged that the issue is not the establishment of a classless society, but the reordering of classes in a manner that gives the intellectual the guiding role. Their use of context-free metaphors like class, exploitation, people, capitalism, etc. has undoubtedly helped to obscure the deep structure of their own analysis while at the same time providing the affect release necessary for legitimating the morality of their stance.

Since the publication of Michael B. Katz's The Irony of Early School Reform in 1968, the revisionist educational critics' categories of social domination and class consciousness have exerted a disproportionate influence on serious theoretical discussions of education and its relation to society. While these historically rooted categories focalized past educational reforms as the self serving rather than high minded effort of the powerful social and economic groups, the categories have served to defocalize issues that make the future so problematic. As I have explored in another article many of the characteristics of emergent technological culture, the essential characteristics will simply be identified in order to show how the concerns of revisionist educators channelled the educational debate into an intellectual and cultural cul de sac that is far removed from the problems created by the increasing spread of technological consciousness.

The most important characteristic of technological consciousness overlooked by the revisionists relates to the nature and pervasiveness of purposive rational thought. Its use of positivism as a means of providing knowledge that will enable people to relate to the physical and social world in instrumental ways is one of the greatest dangers we face. The danger is in its reduction of reality to the "technically exploitable," its claim to a form of moral superiority which

excludes more traditional moral claims that cannot be settled in terms of measureable and observable phenomena, and its concern with increasing the efficiency of prediction and control over social and physical events. In effect technological consciousness involves a basic change in the mode of social interaction which reflects the way in which an overwhelming concern with technological phenomena influences how "reality" is constituted and known. The mode of thought and communication in a technocracy, according to Habermas, is characterized by purposive-rational action or instrumental reason.[11] This involves a form of thought shaped by technical rules, and which sees the world as objectively real. As Habermas points out, this mode of thought is governed by strategies for attaining specific ends. This involves, in effect, a problem solving orientation to the world, and is communicated in a universalistic, context free language code. People are not seen as complex personalities, but as the embodiment of internalized roles and norms that structure their action in line with the imperatives of technical rules and rationally designed social systems. They become through socialization a component of a sub-system that must be rationally integrated into the larger systems of the social-cultural world. The danger Habermas sees in instrumental action is that another mode of knowing and communicating, what he calls "communicative action" may be entirely repressed. As an epistemological category, communication involves a mode of knowing where "reality" is constituted (not discovered as objectively given) through the symbolic interaction of people. Definitions, meanings and values, as expressions of people's intersubjective experience, are sustained and renegotiated through communication. Habermas also points out that communicative action involves a

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[11] Jurgen Habermas, Toward a Rational Society. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968. pp. 92-93.

community of actors and speakers, which does not exist in the hierarchically organized society of a technocracy.

Another problem relates to the revisionists' tendency to adopt the traditional Marxist view that capitalism is the chief cause of social evil. This position obscures the fact tnat Communist societies, which are often held up as models, have not solved the social, economic and psychological problems associated with a technocratic society. For example, in an unsuccessful attempt to demonstrate their economic and technological superiority over liberal democracies, Communist societies have adopted Taylorism to increase the efficiency of production. Another example relates to their failure to eliminate the dehumanizing wage-labor system. It should also be added that Communist societies have failed to humanize work to fit the idyllic image of the craftsman used by Marxists as a basis for criticizing the alienating nature of work in capitalist societies. As several observers have pointed out, Marxist societies are better suited to rapid technological change because of their approach to centralized planning. It should also be noted that the massive bureaucracies created in Communist societies which are the instruments of the Communist party, represent a new form of class society.

If one deals with evidence rather than the reified rhetoric of messanic Marxism, it becomes patently clear that Communist societies have not evolved cultural alternatives to the dehumanizing effects of technology and bureaucracy. Given this fact one can only wonder why the Marxist-influenced educational revisionists would see in Russia, Cuba, and China the inspiration for a revolutionary class struggle in liberal democratic societies like the United States.

One must also be concerned about their inability to present a balanced picture of American society that includes recognition of the achievements made in the area of human freedom and civil liberties. Jean Francois Revel, in

The Totalitarian Temptation, noted that the Left in non-Communist nations refuses to "draw the necessary political, economic, and moral conclusions from realities in socialist societies." On the other hand, he observed, "the faults of free societies are so magnified that freedom appears to mask an essentially totalitarian reality, while the faults of totalitarian societies are so minimized that those societies appear to be free, in essence if not in appearance."[12] The tendency to magnify the problems of American society while remaining silent about the civil liberties, economic, and social advantages enjoyed by so many Americans--including the Leftist educational revisionists who mostly occupy safe academic positions--is such a pervasive characteristic of the revisionists' writings that one can only wonder if it is not an expression of ressentiment. Witness the introduction to Roots of Crisis: American Education in the Twentieth Century where the authors castigate the liberals "who still believe in the American dream and the basic soundness of this social system. . . ." "If one starts," they wrote of their own position, "with the assumption that this society is in fact racist, fundamentally materialistic, and institutionally structured to protect vested interests, the past takes on vastly different meaning."[13] One might add that the future would take on a profoundly different meaning if the revisionists' vision were to prevail. In his review of Schooling in Capitalist America, Robert Heilbroner observed that the organic and collective approach to culture which characterizes socialism might require its citizen to have a non-critical attitude that the revisionist educators themselves might find repugnant. The vision of "historical necessity" that proposes to use

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[12]Jean Francois Revel, The Totalitarian Temptation, Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Co., 1977, pp. 23-24.

[13]Clarence Karier, Paul Violas, Joel Spring, Roots of Crisis: American Education in the Twentieth Century, Chicago, 1973, p. 5.

party directed bureaucrats, the ecclesiastics of the new secular faith, to bring equality to the people will have little use for freedom of thought, as it might lead to questioning attitudes about the foundations of the new social order.

Lastly, the widespread attention given in educational circles to the revisionist critique of American education has diverted attention from the crucial importance of the ecological crisis. The messianic use of the class conflict concept when we cannot even be sure of the concept's explanatory power seems to be fundamentally irresponsible. The real issue that Leftists should have confronted is whether traditional Marxism has adequate conceptual categories for analyzing the cultural roots of the ecological crisis. As the crisis deepens, the question of class, at least in North America, might serve as a means for ritual recrimination; but it will not provide guidance for arresting or reversing the rate at which Western cultures are depleting non-renewable resources. The traditional Marxism from which the revisionists draw inspiration is predicated on the same assumptions about unlimited growth, progress, the neutrality of science and technology, and the supremacy of purposive rational thought, that are embraced by most people living in western technocracies. That part of Marx's own writings which deals with fetishes, reification, species being, praxis, and consciousness has tended to be denigrated as romantic by traditionalist Marxists who have followed the Engels-Lenin interpretation of Marxism. Had they taken this part of Marx's ideas seriously they might have evolved the conceptual categories necessary for thinking reflexively about the assumptions relating to science and technology which serve as the conceptual underpinnings of both communist and liberal democratic societies. There is little evidence that either the early Marx or the more recent Critical Theorists were read by the educational revisionists, consequently they could focalize only those issues that their borrowed lenses were designed to see. They could

provide the traditional explanations about why industrial democracies are facing collapse from a lack of natural resources; it would be seen as inevitable in a social system that makes a virtue of greed, materialism, and imperialism. But what would they say about communist technocracies that are faced with similar energy shortages and polluted environments? Or what could they help us understand about the symbolic fragmentation and increasing loneliness which appears to result from the low-context form of modern, technologically based cultures? Traditional Marxism not only lacks a theory of bureaucracy, as one observer noted, but also a theory of modernization that explains how it affects both the individual's psyche and the ecosystems. Without either, the analysis of the Leftist educators will provide little guidance for dealing with the problematic future faced by all industrialized societies.